The eadgīþ Erasure: 
A Gloss on the Old English Andreas

A half-erased woman’s name is partially legible at the bottom of folio 41 verso of the Anglo-Saxon manuscript we now call the Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare MS 117; see Figure 1). Edith—eadgīþ—provides mystery as highly unusual marginalia, an individual name added to and then erased from the manuscript. Edith has been analytically as well as literally erased—scholars working on Andreas, the poem in which the eadgīþ marginalia appears, do not know that she hovers in the margin of the poem, because she is not noted in the poem’s editions (Krapp, Brooks). I would like to suggest that the erased name eadgīþ is a direct reference to St. Edith of Wilton, the daughter of King Edgar who was the patron saint of Wilton Abbey, and that it thus functions as something of a gloss for the section of Andreas in which it appears.

The erasure is actually quite clear in the manuscript, possibly because C. Maier applied reagent to it in 1834. Celia Sisam, the editor of the manuscript’s facsimile, and Maier agree that the erasure is in a hand different from the scribe’s, and that it occurred slightly after the creation of the manuscript.

FIGURE 1. Detail from folio 41 verso of the Vercelli Book. Reproduced by permission of the Archivio Capitolare, Archdiocese of Vercelli, Italy.
(31). Line 949 of Andreas ends at the bottom of folio 41v; a triangle of dots then precedes a tilde. Following the tilde, the erased name appears on the line—it is not actually marginalia because it is not in the margin—at the end of the section of Andreas that details Andrew’s journey (in a boat steered by Christ) to Mermedonia to free St. Matthew and convert the cannibals.

This first poem in the manuscript, often compared to Beowulf in its length, style, and heroic presentation, has not inspired feminist analyses. Critical discussions of Andreas tend to focus on the poem’s relationship to missionary and penitential practices in the Anglo-Saxon church as well as its possible textual relationship to Beowulf. Andreas does not have a female hero or an editorial title such as Juliana (in the Exeter Book), Judith (in the Beowulf manuscript), or Elene (at the end of the Vercelli Book); these three poems have been suggested as appropriate reading for a female audience, especially one composed of nuns. No such suggestion of appropriateness has been made for Andreas—and yet there is an erased name of a woman approximately one-third of the way through the text.

Queen Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor who reigned from 1042 to 1066, is the most politically and socially prominent Edith in Anglo-Saxon England in the approximately seventy-five years that span from the Vercelli Book’s creation in ca. 1000 to its arrival in Italy by the late eleventh century. Saintly Edith of Polesworth is another famous Edith from the early eleventh century. Of course, we know only about the aristocratic women who have their names preserved in the textual record—in addition to the royal women, there must have been innumerable Ediths who left no textual trace in history. Yet the context of the poem wherein the erased eadgifu appears can help to narrow the field of possible referents to St. Edith of Wilton.

The inclusion of Edith in the text of Andreas comes at the point in which Andrew has finally arrived safely in Mermedonia. It has been a long and treacherous voyage, and Andrew feared for his life during a storm at sea. He did not know—he did not have enough faith—that Christ was his helmsman in the literal as well as spiritual sense; Christ calmed the storm so that Andrew could continue his work of rescue and conversion. It is interesting that the erased Edith is included at just this point, because St. Edith of Wilton was a storm calmer as well; like Christ for Andrew, she calmed the sea—once for Ealdred, Archbishop of York (who held office from 1061 to 1069) and once for King Cnut (who ruled from 1016 to 1035). In the shorter, Acta Sanctorum version of Edith’s Vita, eleventh-century hagiographer Goscelin of Canterbury merely tells us “unde semel orta in mari tempestate, B. Editham invocavit, & serenitate reddit, ad portum optatum applicuit” (How once with a storm rising in the sea, he [Canutus] invoked blessed Edith, and with serenity having returned, he landed at his desired harbor) (Goscelin, Acta). The expanded version of the text provides much more detail:

Aliquando ergo patrium regnum repetendo Danimarcarum, in illo uasto pelago seuis lactabatur tempestatis. Tum ille, iam pene obrui se uidens fluctibus,
crebris insonat clamoribus: “Sancta Editha, succurre; Christe, libera nos meritis sancte Edithe.” Interea gloria sa timor levitasse apparentes fluctuantis: “En assum tibi,” inquit, “Editha quam invocasti, et tibi in auxilio vocata venit; et ecece tibi per ipsum cui aucti obediunt et mare hanc tempestatem sedauerit.” His dictis, respicit, et ecece, mirabile uisa, omnis spiritus procellarum conquiescit, et magne tranquillitas gaudioque de periculo arrisit. (Goscelin, Vita 279)

Then, returning to the ancestral kingdom of Denmark, in that vast sea he was thrown in severe tempests. Already seeing himself obliterated by the flowing waves, then that one made noise with a multitude of cries, “Saint Edith, assist me; Christ, free us by the merits of St. Edith.” Meanwhile, the glorious virgin, becoming visible in the most deadly waves: “Lo! I am here for you,” she said, “Edith whom you called, and I, so called, came to you in assistance and behold! for you I have brought to rest this tempest through (the power of) the same one to whom the winds and the sea are obedient.” Having said these words, she looked back, and behold—it was marvelous to see—she gathered together all the spirit of the storms, and she smiled with great tranquility and joy, free from danger.

The textual similarity between the narratives of Andrew and Edith suggests that the erased *eadgip* on folio 41 verso is a reference to St. Edith of Wilton, and that, while reading the storm-calming segment of *Andreas*, an early eleventh-century reader of the Vercelli Book was reminded of Edith’s recent rescue of Cnut.

Much has been written recently on St. Edith of Wilton. The main source for her life is Goscelin’s *Vita Edithae*. Edith was born in the early 960s; her mother Wulflhryth used to be described as King Edgar’s mistress or concubine, but Susan Ridyard has argued, convincingly, that she was his first wife who retired to Wilton as its abbess shortly after the birth of their daughter (43). The inscription on the seal of Wilton Abbey calls Edith a “royal sister,” perhaps punning on her status as spiritual Sister Edith and as biological sister to two kings, Edward the Martyr and Æthelred the Unready. The seal text reads, “SIGILL.EDGYDER.ROGAL. ADELPHAE”; T. A. Heslop has argued that it is the actual seal used by Edith during her lifetime (4). He dates it quite specifically to the late tenth century and suggests that she might have worn it as a pendant. Although it is unlikely, the seal’s claim of royalty could also refer to the supposed offer of the crown made to Edith by the earldoms after the murder of Edward the Martyr, a historically suspect but very interesting episode in Goscelin’s *Vita* (84–86). Goscelin as well states that Edith was made abbess of three different nunneries during her lifetime, although she preferred to stay under her mother’s rule at Wilton (thus demonstrating a hagiographically commonplace humility) (*Vita* 76–77). She was in contact with the Benedictine leaders Dunstan and Æthelwold; she dedicated (and presumably paid for) a church of St. Denis at Wilton shortly before her death in 984 at the age of twenty-three. The *Vita* details a series of posthumous miracles, performed for the benefit of both her community and the English royal house; at her translation thirteen years later, her body was found uncorrupted.
Goscelin refers in his text to the oral tradition at Wilton (Vita 39); he most likely used a now lost Old English version of the life of Edith as well. Sharon Elkins even goes so far as to state definitively that Goscelin “revised a life of St. Edith” into his eleventh-century text (6). Another vernacular version exists in the enormously entertaining fifteenth-century Middle English poetic Sancta Editha sive Chronicon Vilodunense (Horrismann); Edith’s life then underwent a series of linguistic changes from the vernacular to Latin and back to the vernacular. Her cult was still very much alive in the early sixteenth century as well, as William Lambarde’s 1596 treatise The Perambulation of Kent describes a prereformation ceremony in which seed corn was blessed before an image of Edith (507–08). This series of texts and assertions of oral transmission demonstrate the popularity of Edith and the strength of the devotion of the Wilton community to her memory, even six hundred years after her death.

Edith’s continued popularity most likely stemmed, as Ridyard indicates, from her ability to protect her house from a variety of threats. Her posthumous miracles all somehow involve the protection of the abbey of Wilton—its relics, prestige, and lands. Even the storm-calming episode ultimately benefits the abbey, as Cnut gives great gifts in return for his deliverance by the saint. It seems logical, then, to analyze the eadgīth erasure as a gloss entered into the Vercelli Book soon after its making, a gloss entered by a reader who knew the traditions and narratives of the cult of St. Edith of Wilton and made a connection between the universal male saint and the local female one.

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NOTES

1. The photograph was taken by Lora MacLaughlin; permission to publish was granted by Archivio Capitolare, Archdiocese of Vercelli, Italy.

2. I have differentiated the texts throughout by referring to the shorter version as Acta, the longer as Vita; a new translation of the Vita, edited by Stephanie Hollis, is forthcoming from Brepols as Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin’s Legend of Edith and Liber Confortatorius.

3. I have corrected some of the typography here; Wilmarth’s text does not set off inquit with another pair of quotation marks.

4. Latin translations are my own and are literal rather than literary.

WORKS CITED


“Skep” (Beinenkorb, *beoleap) as a Culture-Specific Solution to Exeter Book Riddle 17

The solution to Exeter Book Riddle 17 (Muir’s numbering)1 was formerly such a mystery that editors despaired, both Williamson (Old English Riddles 176) and Muir (2: 618) labeling the riddle “uncertain” in their editions. The rune Beorc (B) above the text has suggested burg and ballista, but German and Dutch scholars have recently favored a solution involving beekeeping. My essay endorses this solution, examines a crux, argues for a connection with a riddle by Aldhelm, and concludes with an emphasis on the importance of specificity for a modern reader of Anglo-Saxon texts.

Many of the Exeter Book riddles have so far failed to find clear solutions. Along with a few classical “arbitrary riddles”2 for which the answer is well known (like Riddle 85, “a one-eyed seller of garlic”) and a number of religious riddles and translations from earlier Latin riddles, the majority of these brief poems depend on a knowledge of objects and creatures familiar to the Anglo Saxons for their answer: ships, swans, the bull whose hide becomes leather, chickens, quill pens, a book-eating moth, and so forth. Even the few salacious riddles refer to items such as onions, helmets, dough, and butter churns. A number of riddles are clear to a degree but leave the specific solution in doubt: for example, is the musical instrument in Riddle 31 a bagpipe, a “Sutton Hoo” type lyre, or a related stringed instrument (since it is described as sellie “rare” in the hall, it is probably not the familiar lyre, now confirmed by several additional English finds3); and does Riddle 15 refer to a fox or a hedgehog4? Yet even these alternatives, with the arguments that are made for them, give us scraps of a culture.